

Wouldn't You Really Rather Have a Paleotragus?

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Dáina Chaviano's career got its first major lift with the reception of the David Award, for *Los mundos que amo* and since then she has become one of the most important figures in science fiction in Cuba. For several years she directed the first workshop for new SF authors in Latin America, led conferences and published articles in magazines, made frequent appearances on the radio and even contributed commentary to SF film cycles shown on Cuban television.

Los mundos que amo would have impressed the David Award jury for a number of reasons (exceptional work; a clear rejection of that overuse of techno-paraphernalia found marring no small number of SF texts; interest in tracing characters' psychology; concern for great verisimilitude in the exposition of environments and situations), but I suspect that the main reason was its vitality, its air of promise. At a time when Cuban SF had no more than a single writer still working stubbornly to cultivate the form in spite of the general indifference of his colleagues (Ángel Arango), a twenty-something female author suddenly arrived on the scene with five stories that, with their freshness and spontaneity, injected hope into a genre languishing for want of new authors.

Every story in that first book knocks at a different door. The most significant of that small volume – not only for the testimony-like efficacy of its first-person narration but also for its contemporary Cuban setting – is the novella which lends the collection its name. “Los mundos que amo” entices through its mixture of ingenuity and vehemence, for its explicit call to peace and understanding between men. However, those of us who assumed that the future paths of Dáina Chaviano might be contained within this story of a young girl's contact with an extraterrestrial civilization were in for a huge and marvelous surprise when her second collection of stories appeared.

In *Amoroso planeta*, the author explores multiple possibilities of the fantastic, mythical and oneiric, depending on her interests. In these stories, it's a cosmonaut who wakes the Sleeping Beauty on a distant planet; the relationship between a woman



traveling through space and a unicorn is a parable about love capable of destroying prejudices of all sorts. The erotic and magical – fundamental elements of what has been called the “New Wave” of SF – are constants in these markedly poetic tales. The author starts with motifs from diverse cultures (Egyptian in “El papiro de Ptah”; Hebrew in “La anunciación”; Greek in “Níobe”, a story indispensable to any Latin American anthology of the genre) and uses them freely and creatively to construct original interpretations.

The book caused consternation among lovers of traditional SF, no doubt. The Young Prince chatting with an astronaut? Witches, vampires and pegasuses coexisting with spaceships and time traveling? What’s curious about these stories, which owe so much to folklore and children’s literature, is that after reading them, as Ángel Arango noted, “the reality of what we’ve seen happen is implicitly asserted, because for Daína Chaviano, myths and fairy tales were in some way the reality of men, or could have a real-life counterpart”.

After reading *Amoroso planeta*, critic Jean-Pierre Moumon, co-editor of the French SF magazine *Antares*, predicted that future works by the author would lean toward “the magical and the marvelous”. ***Historias de hadas para adultos*** confirms that judgment.

This third book by the young author is the logical result of a process of maturation and decantation; it should be seen not as an isolated work but rather as the consequence of the formal and thematic quests and findings glimpsed in her preceding work. But let’s pause to reflect on each of the three novellas brought together here.

The first thing that must be said about “La granja” is that it is absolutely not a SF story, in spite of the genre classification appearing on the cover. It’s a history that, following the typology proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in his book “Introduction to Fantastic Literature”, could be characterized as “fantastic-marvelous”. That is, the story presents itself as fantasy during its first pages and concludes with the narrating character accepting that the events transpired are of a supernatural character. With “La granja”, the author sets out to tackle a problem which has attracted quite a few writers in recent years: the relationship between fantasy and contemporary man. In a certain sense, the story is a kind of thesis; thus, the conceptual tone taken in much of its dialogue. On an old estate able to move through time and space, picking up and setting down anywhere that humanity is compelled by fantasy, the characters of the King Arthur saga come alive. These give shelter to a lost journalist on a rainy night and discover, to his amazement, corners of reality whose existence they never even suspected.



The novella is also a homage from Daína Chaviano to her biggest literary loves. A homage evinced through the use of classic Anglo-Saxon characters as well as through the passage which describes the protagonist's first visit to the mansion's library, where he finds the shelves filled with books by authors previously unknown to him (James Frazer, Mary Stewart, Michael Ende, Ursula K. LeGuin). But the homage becomes at times even more subtle, intertextual. Is it just a coincidence that the magic word used by the inhabitants of the estate in order to penetrate their barn-imaginary-archive-of-humanity is "friend", the same word pronounced by the wizard Gandalf when he sought to enter the doors of Durin, Lord of Moria ("The Lord of the Rings", J.R.R. Tolkien, volume I)?

The force of "La granja" is like that of a big doorknocker, an exhortation to fantasy as a means of perfecting of human beings. The presence of the palaeotragus – that mysterious, "sweet and melancholy" animal first invisible and later perceived by the hero – is the leitmotif of the story, reminding us that the ability to imagine, to creatively reorganize the elements of reality, must not be restricted to the world of children, but rather a form of defense as we pass into the complicated world of adults. You too can have a palaeotragus, the author seems to tell us. The only thing necessary is to be able to discover it in the midst of your daily coming-and-going, even if it's hidden by forests of monotony.

The other two pieces which make up the collection ("La dama del ciervo" and "Un hada en el umbral de la Tierra") contribute in distinctive ways to that SF convention by which what appears to be supernatural ends up receiving a rational or plausible explanation.

A constant theme in Daína's narration, from her first up to her most recent writings, is her preoccupation with her communication with the reader. That causes her, on occasion, to be more explicit than we might like, in an eagerness to ensure no threads of the plot go loose, so that nothing is left unclear to those for whom the texts are destined. Even when she sets out on an experiment in form, her inquiry is always subordinated to her determination that nothing might interfere too much with the close reader-story connection that she seeks to lay down from the first paragraphs. This explains, in part, why we re-encounter "La dama del ciervo" (originally a short story from *Amoroso planeta*) transformed into a text of greater length. Dark areas, topics only lightly sketched or hinted at in the previous version have been taken up and developed.

"La dama del ciervo" sets out to examine the birth of legends which have haunted human beings since ancient times. As such, it's no accident that the names of its protagonists (Vrena and Adante, leaders of the forces of Good and Evil, respectively)



recall those of our Biblical fathers: Daína creates an original Genesis, only that of humanity's myths, not humanity itself. Magic, or mutations due to radioactive contamination? Might Faunuses, vampires and witches actually be the unfortunate offspring of a species in extinction, ancestors of the men called upon to magnify them, reinvent them by works of the imagination?

In the manner of the classics of fantastic literature, the narration repeatedly returns to enigmas which, even when they're revealed, continue to be cryptic. The tropological appeals lend themselves to a style close to that of the ancient sagas, which also explains the deliberate exoticism of the scenes and the presence of an exalted romanticism in the description and dialogue.

"Un hada en el umbral de la Tierra" is the most complex and ambitious of the brief novels included in the book: it's based essentially on the parallel established between the fairies (a homage to the ill-tempered Tinkerbell of "Peter Pan and Wendy", by James M. Barrie) and the mysterious survivors of the planet Garnys.

We find here a solid structure in which voices sometimes superimpose themselves vertiginously and where each character's psychological design is carefully treated. For the first time in Cuban SF, the mother-son relationship becomes the center of attention, an axis around which the story turns; the tenderness of Niza and the candor of Tomy, as well as the strained communion they sustain in the midst of an extremely dangerous situation, contrasts with the horror which eventually becomes a protagonist. Moreover, the intensely dramatic progression of the plot and the addition of suspenseful elements which conclude in a climax of high tension all deserve to be celebrated.

To conclude, it's worth noting something which emerges from everything expressed up to this point: in the perhaps somewhat monotonous context of Cuban SF, this book represents a personal and unmistakable landmark. With *Historias de hadas para adultos*, Daína Chaviano invites us to clear out virgin territory: the work does not fear but rather deliberately seeks out pollution. With her singular use of the magical and marvelous, she seeks to tear down the "purity" of the genre. These novellas are also a reminder that speculation over the future or the exposition of moral, ethical or social ideas, worthy as these might be, do not justify the existence of SF if the conditions of true literature are absent from it.

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